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THE PONY EXPRESS

BY J. M. GUINN.

[Read before the Pioneers, May 7, 1901.]

With our daily newspapers before breakfast, chronicling the history of the whole world for the previous day, it is like going back into the Dark Ages to take a retrospect of California as it was fifty years ago.

Then Eastern State news a month old, and European dispatches that had voyaged on two oceans for 50 days or more, were the latest, and, on the arrival of the steamer, the San Francisco papers got out extras, and prided themselves on their enterprise as news disseminators. When mail matter was sent out from the metropolis of California to the mines in the north and the cow counties in the south, it often took it another month to reach its destination.

It is of record that one mail from San Francisco for Los Angeles, in 1851, was fifty-two days in reaching the old pueblo; and four weeks was not uncommonly slow time. The Star of October 1, 1853, under the head of "Information Wanted," wants to know "what has become of the mail for this section of the world." "Some four weeks since," says the editor, "the mail actually did arrive; since then, two other mails are due, but none have come."

Again, the Star of November 20, 1852, says the latest dates from San Francisco are October 28, now 23 days old. Of the results of the State election that took place three weeks ago, we are in the most profound ignorance, having received returns from no county in the State except Los Angeles. Think of the protracted agony of a candidate still waiting three weeks after the election to know his fate!

While the newsmongers, the merchants and the candidates suffered from the mail's delay, how was it with the honest miners, in the lonely mining camps? No novelist or sentimentalist has written of the hope deferred that made the heart sick of many an Argonaut—and all because of the mail's uncertainty. Isolated from the world in mountain mining camps, where no mail reached them, the miners of the early '50's were depend-

ent upon private carriers, who brought them at irregular intervals the few letters that ran the gauntlet of ocean disasters, careless postmasters and reckless stage drivers.

As the Argonaut, in most cases, was a young man, fresh from home, who had left a girl behind him to await his return with a fortune, the anxiety with which he watched for a letter from home to know whether his girl was still waiting for him or whether some other fellow was waiting on her, was truly pathetic. Home-sickness killed many an Argonaut, and the defective mail system of the early '50's ought to have been indicted for manslaughter. I know we laugh at a homesick individual, but a genuine attack of the disease is no laughing matter. The medical reports of the Union army during the Civil War attribute no less than 10,000 deaths to nostalgia, the medical name for home-sickness.

As the population of the Pacific Coast increased, the demand for quicker mail service became more imperative. The scheme of importing camels and dromedaries and using them in carrying the mail and express across the plains was agitated. It was claimed that the camel, filling his internal water tank out of the Missouri river, could strike straight across the waterless wastes of New Mexico and Arizona, stopping occasionally for a meal of sage brush, and taking a drink at the Colorado river, he could trot across the Colorado desert and deliver the mail in the California coast towns fifteen days from New York.

As some of you will recollect, the camels did come to the coast in 1857, but they were not delivering mail; they were carrying freight, and were not much of a success at that. The Butterfield stage route was established in 1858. It was the longest stage line in the world. Its western terminus was San Francisco, and its eastern termini Memphis and St. Louis. It brought the eastern news in 20 days. That was such an unprecedented quick time that the Los Angeles Star rushed out an extra edition and proposed a hundred guns for the overland stage. But the people wanted faster time, and the Pony Express was established in 1860. I take the following graphic description of its first trip across the plains from the Kansas City Star:

"An important event in the history of St. Joseph, Mo., was the starting of the 'Pony Express' on April 3, 1860. The facts and incidents connected with this ride of 2,000 miles to San Francisco form a most interesting chapter in the story of early western progress.

"In 1859 St. Joseph was the western terminus of railroad communication. Beyond the Missouri river the stage coach, the saddle horse and the ox trains were the only means of commerce and communication with the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Slope, across a space now traveled by a dozen vestibuled trains daily.

"In the winter of 1860 a Wall street lobby was in Washington trying to get \$5,000,000 for carrying the mails one year between New York and San Francisco. The proposition was nothing more or less than an attempt to bunko the government. William H. Russell, who was then interested largely in freighting business on the plains, backed by the Secretary of War, resolved to give the lobby a cold shower bath. Russell offered to wager \$200,000 that he could put on a mail line between San Francisco and St. Joseph that could make the distance, 1,950 miles, in ten days. The wager was accepted, and April 8, 1860, was fixed upon as the date for starting.

"Mr. Russell summoned his partner and general manager of business on the plains, A. B. Miller, for many years a prominent citizen of Denver, told what he had done, and asked if he could perform the feat. Miller replied, 'Yes, I'll do it, and I'll do it by pony express.'

"To accomplish this service, Miller bought 300 of the fleetest horses he could find in the West, and employed 125 brave and hardy riders. These men were selected with reference to their light weight and courage. It was highly essential that the horses should be loaded as lightly as possible, because some sections of the route had to be covered at the rate of 20 miles an hour.

"The horses were stationed from 10 to 20 miles apart, and each rider was required to ride 75 miles. For each change of animals and the transfer of the United States mails two minutes were allowed. Where there were no stage stations at proper distances, tents capable of accommodating one man and two horses were provided. Indians, it was supposed, would sometimes give chase, but their cayuse ponies could make only sorry show in pursuit of Miller's thoroughbreds, many of which could make a mile in 1 minute and 50 seconds.

"All arrangements being completed for this great undertaking, a signal gun on a steamer at Sacramento proclaimed the meridian of April 8, 1860, the hour for starting. At that signal Mr. Miller's private saddle horse, Border Ruffian, with a brave rider in the saddle, bounded away toward the foothills

of the Sierra Nevadas. The first 20 miles were covered in 49 minutes, and this feat was repeated until the mountains were reached. The snows were deep in the mountains, and one rider was lost for several hours in a snow storm. After Salt Lake Valley had been reached, additional speed became necessary to reach St. Joseph in time. From there on, however, all went well until the Platte river was to be crossed at Julesburg.

"The stream was swollen and running rapidly, but the horse plunged into the flood, only, however, to mire in quicksand and drown. The courier succeeded in reaching the shore with his mail bag safe and traveled ten miles on foot to reach the next relay. The journey from this point to within 60 miles of St. Joseph was made quickly and without incident.

Johnny Fry, a popular rider of his day, was to make the finish. He had 60 miles to ride, with six horses upon which to do it. When the last courier arrived at the 60-mile post out from St. Joseph, he was one hour behind time. A heavy rain had set in and the roads were slippery.

"Fry had just 3 hours and 30 minutes in which to win. It was the finish of the longest race and largest stake ever run in America.

"When the time for Fry's arrival was nearly up, at least 5,000 people stood upon the river bank, with eyes turned toward the woods from which the horse and its rider should emerge into the open country in the rear of Elwood, one mile from the finish.

"Tick, tick!" went hundreds of watches. The time was nearly up. Only seven minutes remained.

"Hark !

"Hurrah !" A shout goes up from the assembled multitude. The courier comes! A noble little mare darts like an arrow from the bow and makes the run of the last mile in 1 minute and 50 seconds, landing upon the ferryboat off Francis street with five minutes and a fraction to spare.

"The story of this remarkable feat is only a scrap of history now. A few of the riders who participated in the great race are still living, and hundreds of old timers recall the scenes and incidents that marked the finish of the splendid contest against time. It was a great event in the history of St. Joseph.

"It was five days prior to the running of the great race for the \$200,000 wager that the first Pony Express left St. Joseph for the west. At 7:15 p. m. on Tuesday, April 3, 1860, a rider

received at the United States Express office in St. Joseph his light burden of dispatches, and amid the cheers and huzzas of the vast throng assembled to witness the event darted off across the plains of Kansas and on into the distant west. This event created so much excitement in St. Joseph that the little pony was almost robbed of his tail, the crowds of people assembled at the starting point being desirous of preserving a memento of the flying messenger."

The rider at the western end of the route, who reached Sacramento April 13, 1860, was accorded even a more enthusiastic reception, although no bet was pending on the time of his arrival. The news of his coming was heralded with great enthusiasm, and both houses of the Legislature adjourned to welcome him. He came in time for the regular afternoon steamboat, and the horse and the rider, with the mail bag, just as they had come into Sacramento, took passage on the boat and arrived at the wharf in San Francisco at 1 o'clock on the morning of April 14th, with the mail, just 10½ days from St. Joe. They were met by an enthusiastic crowd with a band and torches. A procession was formed; and with music and continuous cheers they were escorted to the postoffice. The quickest time ever made between San Francisco and New York by overland mail via the Buterfield route was 20 days. The Pony Express shortened this time to 10 days.

The Pony Express was a semi-weekly service. Fifteen pounds was the limit of the weight of the waterproof mail bag and its contents that twice a week, from each end started on its long journey.

The postage or charge was \$5.00 a letter of half an ounce. The line never paid. In fact, its owners operated it throughout its existence at a loss. The high charges necessitated by the cost of keeping up relays of men and horses prevented it from being extensively patronized. It seldom carried over 200 letters, and sometimes not more than 20. It reduced the time for letters from New York to San Francisco to 13 days, and telegraphic dispatches to 9 days, at first; and later on to 8 days. Messages were sent to Fort Kearny, the extreme western station, and taken up by the rider as he came along. The messages were re-dispatched from Carson City, which was connected by telegraph with San Francisco. Letters and messages were written on a tough page of tissue paper, very thin and light, which was specially prepared for the express company. The stamp, now very rare, was embellished with a pic-

ture of a man on horseback spurring at a gallop across the plains. During the exciting times at the breaking out of the Civil War in 1861, the pony express was the sole reliance of the whole Pacific Coast for the quickest news. The Indians on the western end, and the Confederates on its eastern end had destroyed the Butterfield stage line. It was to the Pony Express that every one looked for the latest intelligence.

Although the enterprise failed to pay expenses, to the praise of Russell and Majors, be it recorded, they kept it up until the overland telegraph was completed, in November, 1861.

The Pony Express required to do its work nearly 500 horses, about 190 stations, 200 station keepers and 80 riders. Each rider usually rode the horses on about 75 miles, though sometimes much greater distances were made. One rider—Robert H. Haslam—or Pony Bob, as he was usually called—on one occasion made a continuous ride of 380 miles within a few hours of schedule time. Another—Wm. F. Cody, now famous as Buffalo Bill—rode in one continuous trip 384 miles without stopping, except for meals and to change horses. The greatest feat performed by the Pony Express was in carrying President Lincoln's inaugural message, in March, 1861. The time on that trip from the Missouri river to Sacramento was 7 days and 17 hours, which is perhaps the quickest time, considering the distance, ever made on horseback.

Majors, the originator of the Pony Express, a veteran of 70 years' pioneering on the frontiers, died a few weeks ago. He was a man who had done much for his fellow men. He was a public benefactor. Yet a few lines in an obscure corner of the daily newspapers told the story of his life—at least, it told all the reporter or editor of the paper knew of it; and hundreds who read it had no idea what the Pony Express was. Most of the riders who forty years ago braved the perils of mountain and desert and savage beast and more savage men, in lonesome rides of the Pony Express have crossed the divide between time and eternity.

The following graphic description of the pony rider on his journey is taken from Mark Twain's "Roughing It." Mark saw him in all his glory on his ride, when he (Twain) crossed the plains in the overland stage in 1861:

"In a little while all interest was taken up in stretching our necks watching for the pony rider, the fleet messenger who sped across the continent from St. Joe to Sacramento, carry-

ing letters nineteen hundred miles in eight days! Think of that for perishable horse and human flesh and blood to do! The pony rider was usually a little bit of a man, brimful of spirit and endurance. No matter what time of the day or night his watch came on, and no matter whether it was winter or summer, raining, snowing, hailing or sleeting, or whether his beat was a level, straight road or a crazy trail over mountain crags and precipices, or whether it led through peaceful regions or regions that swarmed with hostile Indians, he must be always ready to leap into the saddle and be off like the wind. There was no idling time for a pony rider on duty. He rode fifty miles without stopping by daylight, moonlight, starlight, or through the blackness of darkness—just as it happened. He rode a splendid horse that was born for a racer and fed and lodged like a gentleman—kept him at his utmost speed for ten miles, and then, as he came crashing up to the station where stood two men holding fast a fresh, impatient steed, the transfer of rider and mail-bag was made in the twinkling of an eye, and away flew the eager pair and were out of sight before the spectator could get hardly the ghost of a look. Both rider and horse went flying light. The rider's dress was thin and fitted close; he wore a roundabout and a skull cap, and tucked his pantaloons into his boot-tops like a race rider. He carried no arms—he carried nothing that was not absolutely necessary, for even the postage on his literary freight was worth five dollars a letter.

“He got but little frivolous correspondence to carry—his bag had business letters in it, mostly. His horse was stripped of all unnecessary weight too. He wore a little wafer of a racing saddle, and no visible blanket. He wore light shoes or none at all. The little flat mail packets strapped under the rider's thighs would each hold about the bulk of a child's primer. They held many and many an important business chapter and newspaper letter, but these were written on paper as airy and thin as gold leaf, nearly, and thus bulk and weight were economized. The stage coach traveled about a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five miles a day of 24 hours; the pony rider about 250. There were eighty pony riders in the saddle all the time, night and day, stretching in a long, scattering procession from Missouri to California—forty flying eastward and forty toward the west, and among them making four hundred gallant horses earn a stirring livelihood and see a deal of scenery every single day in a year.

"We had had a consuming desire, from the beginning to see a pony rider, but somehow or other all that passed us, and all that met us managed to streak by in the night, and so we heard only a whiz and a hail, and the swift phantom of the desert was gone before we could get our heads out of the windows. But now we were expecting one along every moment, and would see him in broad daylight. Presently the driver exclaims: 'HERE HE COMES!' Every neck is stretched further, and every eye strained wider. Away across an endless, dead level of the prairie, a black speck appears against the sky; and it is plain that it moves. Well, I should think so! In a second or two a horse and rider, rising and falling, rising and falling, sweeping towards us, nearer and nearer, growing more and more distinct, more and more sharply defined—nearer and still nearer, and the flutter of the hoofs comes faintly to the ear—another instant a whoop and a hurrah from our upper deck, a wave of the rider's hand, but no reply, and man and horse burst past our excited faces, and go winging away like a be-

"So sudden is it all, and so like a flash of unereal fancy that lated fragment of a storm!

but for the flake of white foam left quivering and perishing on our mail sack after the vision had flashed by and disappeared, we might have doubted whether we had seen any actual horse and man at all, may be."